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GERANIUMS

Popular Summer Bedding Plants



by Griffith J. Buck and Ian R. Lambert

THINGS HAVE changed in the world of geraniums. Once used mainly as house plants and for Memorial Day decorations they are once again popular as summer bedding plants. They began to make their comeback in Iowa in the early part of this decade when the horticulture department of ISU released new varieties that would tolerate hot humid nights that were previously a source of disease.

The popularity of geraniums as outdoor plants is increasing and gardeners now ask for varieties by name instead of by color. The introduction by ISU this spring of two new varieties, Summertime and

Pink Jade, will provide a greater color selection among resistant plants for Iowa enthusiasts.

Origins

Geraniums originally came from South Africa and were taken from the Cape of Good Hope to Europe in the late 18th Century. Most of the European development work was done in France. When the French varieties were brought to this country, each entrepreneur dropped the French name and tagged the plant with a name of his own choice. This caused a great deal of confusion among buyers and growers alike.

New varieties began to be developed in the U.S. about 20 to 25 years ago and were mainly quick-

blooming, quick-propagating types for florists' use. Consequently only indoor varieties were required and none were bred that could stand all outdoor conditions.

In 1965 ISU released two new varieties that were heat and disease resistant. These varieties could survive Iowa-type summers, a feat previously prevented by geraniums' low resistance to high night temperatures and humidities. Since then more people have been growing geraniums especially in well-drained areas of the Gulf Coast.

Varieties

Early varieties released by ISU's department of horticulture were:

Pink Cloud — This clear, salmon-pink flower began the revolution

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GERANIUMS combine well with other plants, such as this planting featuring Galaxie.

in geranium culture 10 years ago. Originated by E. C. Volz and bred with Iowa summers in mind, this variety combines vigor, flower production and heat tolerance. It has become popular with gardeners and growers alike, ranking as the eighth most popular geranium variety in commerce.

Cardinal—This plant with its clear scarlet-red flowers forms an ornamental mound 18 inches high and wide made up of medium sized, velvet-green leaves zoned with olive green.

Galaxie — Galaxie is probably the most significant of the older varieties and has characteristics similar to its parents, Pink Cloud and Cardinal. Its rose coloring is tinted orange to give a salmon-rose effect. Cuttings root and come to flower readily.

Pink Jade was new last year and is similar in growing habits and heat resistance to its parent, Pink Cloud. Pink Jade has translucent florets up to 2 inches in diameter colored light orchid-pink to pale neyron-rose with a large white blotch at the base of the upper petals. Its pink tonings become more intense with age.

Summertime is a new variety that will be introduced by ISU this

spring. It is grown from a cross between Cardinal and a Pink Cloud-Summer Cloud cross. Summertime has a higher heat tolerance than Pink Cloud. Its color is carmine with a salmon-pink overlay which imparts warmth and richness to the flower color. There is a small white blotch at the base of the upper petals. Faded florets are well hidden by newly opened buds.

Two more distinctive varieties, *Skylark* and *Toreador*, should be ready for marketing in 1970. They have completed a rigorous, 3-year series of tests in five localities including Ames. These localities are thought to provide the toughest and most varied growing conditions that the plant could meet in Iowa. When stocks are expanded for marketing, Skylark, a delicate salmon-coral flower, and Toreador, a deep red that picks up bluish tones, will provide further reliable and attractive geraniums for Iowa enthusiasts.

Still on the production line at ISU are white, orange, and orange-red geraniums. It is relatively easy to obtain the colors required and two of these have already been grown. But it is more difficult to develop a plant that has a balanced form, a good cluster of flowers and that will survive Iowa's growing conditions.

If you want to know where your supplier can get the new varieties, write to Dr. Griffith J. Buck, 108 Horticulture Building, ISU, Ames, Iowa 50010.

Using New Varieties

These new varieties are so versatile that only your imagination limits their use. They are vigorous and combine well with other plants. You can have brilliant or subtle effects depending on your choice of complementary flowers.

The clear salmon-pink of Pink Cloud is improved by its association with blue, lavender, purple, pale yellow or white flowers or by plants with gray foliage. A combination in the Iowa State gardens that has received favorable comment blends Pink Cloud with Royal Purple mealecup sage and the white leaved dusty miller.

You can use the same plant colors with Cardinal as with Pink Cloud. But avoid using salmon-pink tones with Cardinal. A rich vibrant combination can be achieved by combining it with Dark Opal basil and Royal White mealecup sage. A more subtle arrangement is Blue Mink ageratum, Ice Cream zinnia and Cardinal geranium.

To obtain the best effects with Pink Jade and Skylark use the strong blues of ageratum, blue sage (*salvia*), or dark blue petunias. Avoid light colored flowers which are likely to give an anemic appearance with these geraniums.

Summertime also looks good in blue settings but shows best with white surroundings provided by petunias, zinnias or snapdragons. Toreador combines attractively with blues that echo the subtle tints in its deep red petals. Pale yellows provided by marigolds, zinnia, petunias or annual phlox spectacularly point up Toreador's dark tonings.

Geraniums can be used alone, in front of evergreens, in window boxes, as potted or tubbed specimens on the patio or flanking the front entrance, or in a flower border.

Culture

Geraniums are easy to grow and probably stand more abuse by gar-

deners than most other bedding plants. Consider the potted geraniums growing in the kitchen window either over-watered or growing in Sahara-dry soil, or geraniums in the cindery soil of a city lot. Geraniums not only stay alive under such conditions but often grow and flower. But if they are to produce their best form they should at least get the minimum cultural requirements.

Outside Plantings

How large should a geranium be when planted outside? The 4-inch geranium has been the best size for planting outside in tests at Iowa State. This is a plant that has been growing in a 4-inch pot long enough to have become established and to have two or three branches. A plant this size quickly becomes established outside and remains decorative throughout the season. A vigorous 3-inch plant may be used, but because of its smaller size it needs more time to become established outside.

Geraniums are sun lovers and will grow and produce flowers according to the amount of sunlight they receive. So they are ideal for Iowa summers and grow best with at least 8 hours of sunshine per day.

Space the plants to make full use of sunlight and allow 18 inches between plants of new varieties. This may seem too much space at first. Within a short time however, the plants will be touching each other. Wide spacing also encourages low, branching growth.

Geraniums are warm weather plants. Don't be too eager to plant them outside in the spring. When the bearded iris and peonies begin to bloom in mid-May is the time to plant geraniums outdoors.

The new varieties usually reach their peak in growth and flower production by the Fourth of July and produce flowers until frost. These plants, therefore, require more fertilizer and water than older varieties. You can supply adequate nourishment with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of 10-10-10 to 10-20-10 analysis fertilizer (use proportionately less of higher analysis fertilizer) applied in a ring around the plant at planting time and once a month thereafter until frost.

If you plant geraniums in a bed,



EASY TO GROW is one characteristic of geraniums. This is Pink Jade.

use fertilizer at the rate of 1 pound of 10-10-10 to each 100 square feet of bed area. Any lawn and garden fertilizer can be used at this rate. Other fertilizers should be applied at adjusted rates depending on the amount of nitrogen they contain.

Geraniums use large quantities of water. But the semi-succulent geranium plant is susceptible to rotting if planted where water doesn't drain away readily. If the soil drains well, the plants can use at least an inch of water a week. Apply water without wetting the foliage, just as you water your roses.

Diseases

Geraniums are not bothered much by insect pests but are vulnerable to some diseases. While they like high day temperatures and plenty of sunshine they prefer cool nights. And when the nights are hot and humid as they are in Iowa summers, plants are prone to a gray fungus disease known as *Botrytis*. This disease attacks peonies, tulips, and lilies as well, covering buds, flowers, and soft stem tips with clusters of grayish spores. The leaves develop brownish, wrinkled areas and a gray mold can often be seen.

But *Botrytis* can be effectively

controlled if you are careful not to wet the foliage unnecessarily and if you regularly apply a fungicide such as Phaltan, Zineb, Daconil, and Fore. The last two are particularly effective. Ventilation of sheltered areas under the foliage keeps humidity down, making geraniums less liable to contract *Botrytis*.

Wintering

Geraniums are as sensitive to frost as tomatoes, so you must bring them inside before the freezing weather if you want to keep your plants from year to year.

The two usual methods for wintering geraniums are:

1. Root the cuttings in August, put them in a sunny south window and care for the plants as you would any other house plant, or . . .
2. Dig the plants before frost time, shake the loose soil off the roots and hang the plants upside down in a cool dark corner of the basement. The stems will die back to a mature, woody tissue at the base of the plant. Cut off the dry, dead stems before planting outside the following spring. Regardless of how the plants were wintered they can be returned to the open ground in mid-May.